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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the relevance and implications of cross-cultural education for citizens of the United States and foreigners, and provides several definitions of culture. Educators must get closer to the foreign culture they are interested in learning or teaching. In that way they would discover how members of other cultures learn and could then understand why people of different cultures react differently to the same stimuli. Since this has not been done, Americans have become ethnocentric and have alienated other countries that are needed as allies. In the technological world of today it is a moral obligation to learn about the cultures of other countries, if one wishes to be able to evaluate their actions. Americans' main problem lies in their ignorance regarding deep-set cultural patterns of different nations. This ignorance results in a lack of respect for those patterns. Also included are suggestions for possible solutions of some world problems that could be supplied by cross-cultural education. (PS)

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# CROSS CULTURAL EDUCATION: ITS RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES.

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# Cross-cultural Education:

## Its Relevance and Implications in the United States

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> "Culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual."[1]

In his book The Silent Language, Edward T. Hall presents a theory of culture as communication, as a set of "hidden rules that govern people" (Hall, p. 55). Culture provides the context in which we exist and it dominates our lives in ways we are not aware of. In different cultures people even "learn to learn differently... (and) the rest of culture reflects the way one learns since culture is learned and shared behavior" (Hall, p. 71). If educators would learn how members of other cultures learn, they would be able to get much closer to the foreign culture they are interested in learning or teaching. They would understand why people of different cultures react differently to the same stimuli.

Americans are in many ways guilty of ethnocentrism. They often try to impose their ways of perceiving the world and dealing with it on other nationals. When foreigners do not respond as Americans would, then there is the tendency to regard them as "underdeveloped Americans" (Hall, p. 13). The misinterpretation of other cultures and the consequent erroneous expectations alienate the United States from next-door neighbors as much as from far-away countries. This alienation and misunderstanding can only bring chaos and disagreement

among nations. America, the provider, the "bread basket" of the world, is hated in many areas because, consciously or not, it makes other countries feel inferior, uncivilized or underdeveloped. Since besides providing food and other goods to many areas outside the United States and its territories, America is the most powerful stronghold of freedom and human rights in the world, Americans should appreciate the importance of cross-cultural learning. If we treasure our personal freedom we have a moral duty to get other countries on our side to protect that freedom from forces in the world whose basic policy is the curtailment of personal freedom for the glorification and power of the state. The only way to attract other nations to our side is through mutual understanding and respect. Diplomacy is not enough; the superficial relationship it establishes might be useful to arrive at agreements and sign treaties at given times, but even those treaties and agreements are invalidated when there is not a deep insight into and esteem of the cultures and idiosyncracies of other nations.[2]

This paper will analyze the relevance and implications of cross-cultural education for citizens of the United States and foreigners by dealing with the main problem which the writer believes lies in the American ignorance regarding the deep-set cultural patterns of different nations, and as a result, the lack of respect for those patterns. Since there are so many misconceptions regarding culture, several definitions of culture will be provided. The writer will also suggest

some possible solutions which could be supplied by cross-cultural education.

Americans and Foreign Cultures

Culture has always been the domain of the anthropologist. In the first half of this century most Americans considered the study of culture an esoteric field since it mainly concerned itself with exotic subjects unfamiliar to the layman. Why should the people in Iowa or any other state of the Union have concerned themselves with the Samoans, the African Bushmen or the Mexican Indians, when they were not even interested in their own native Indians, forgotten and isolated on reservations as wards of the government? However, during and after World War II there was a need for Americans to interact with other nations more closely. That interaction was not restricted to the familiar countries of Europe but included nations as far removed culturally as India and Japan. By 1938 Mexico had nationalized its petroleum industry and Americans had to deal closely with this neighbor who is the largest foregin supplier of oil to the United States. In 1959, the success of the Cuban Revolution brought Fidel Castro to power and with him, a real threat to democracy not only in the Caribbean region but in Central and South America.

The awakening of the United States to the need for learning foreign cultures has been a slow and painful one. The writer believes that generally Americans lack the knowledge about and consequently the respect for other cultures.

Many mistakes have been made all over the world in the name of democracy and freedom. If the Spanish Inquisition was guilty of many crimes for the sake of Catholicism, so has American foreign policy been abusive and insulting to many countries for the sake of democracy. Of course, there is also the resentment due to the exploitation of the natural resources on foreign soil, but that is not within the confines of this paper. And, actually, history tells us that many times people involved in business are more interested in learning about foreign cultures and respect them more than the diplomats themselves although for mercenary reasons.

As a people, Americans have to become familiar with other cultures because only then can they come to understand and respect the peoples of the world and be understood and respected. You cannot appreciate that which you are not familiar with. Americans will associate Italians with the mafia only if they are not familiar with Michelangelo's Pieta or the Sistine Chapel, or any of the Italian cultural heritage. They will associate Puerto Ricans with the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional) and their indiscriminate bombing if they do not know anything else about the Island, its natural beauty and its Spanish heritage and culture. A New Yorker who only knows the Puerto Ricans of the Barrio, who sees them eating and drinking outside their apartments in the long hot summer nights, will think of Puerto Ricans as uncivilized and lazy people.



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When Spanish-speaking children do badly in an English-speaking classroom, they are considered mentally retarded by those who are ignorant of linguistic and cultural differeences. When Hispanics greet each other with open displays of affection, they are considered emotional. When they meet in conferences or public places and are talkative and friendly, they are considered noisy and not well mannered. When American guests come to dinner to a Spanish American home, and dinner, as usual, is served at eight or later, they think their hosts are either unprepared or inconsiderate. Spanish-speaking teachers are usually considered overdressed in America. When America and Hispanic business people meet for lunch, Americans tend to consider any time given to social graces or interpersonal relationships a waste of time. On the other hand, they are considered rude and callous by their counterparts, who believe Americans only care about business and material things.

## Defining Culture

According to the Webster Dictionary of the American Language, culture is "the concepts, habits, skills, arts, instruments, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period." The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines culture as "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another." The concept of culture, however, was first defined in print by E.B. Tylor in 1971, and after all these years it still lacks the

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specificity which characterizes less revolutionary and useful ideas (Hall, p. 44). To Hall, "culture is not an exotic notion studied by a select group of anthropologists... It is a mold in which we are all cast, and it controls our daily lives in many unsuspected ways" (p. 52).

From theories borrowed from psychoanalysis, the anthropologists formulated the theory that culture exists on two levels: "overt culture," visible and easily described, and "covert culture," which is not visible and which presents difficulties even to the trained observer. Overt culture later became "explicit culture," which includes such things as law and which is easily observable. Covert culture became "implicit culture," which includes feelings and anything that exists in the fringes of awareness (Hall, p. 85).

As we can see, culture is many things. There is not one basic unit of culture, but many. Some bases for culture are deeply rooted in the biological past, others have developed through the need of societies to adjust to different circumstances such as the lack or abundance of the elements necessary for survival, and yet others have evolved from the interaction with alien peoples and cultures. The concept of culture is a difficult one to grasp because of its indeterminacy. It is very difficult to analyze your own culture if you do not have another one to compare and contrast it with, for culture has many "out-of-awareness" elements which only become apparent through contrast and difference.

## The Need and Potential of Cross-cultural Education

If culture controls many aspects of our daily lives, then we have to understand culture before we can comprehend

the actions and reactions of peoples from different cultures. The only way to grasp and discern a foreign culture is through cross-cultural education. The cross-cultural educator has to be familiar with at least two cultures, his own and the one or ones of the students he is trying to teach. It was said above that culture is learned, although much of it is "out-of-awareness" material. However, by learning a foreign culture, many aspects of a person's own culture become apparent through the shock of contrast and difference. It is then, after he becomes familiar with an alien culture, that the educator can perceive and accept diversity and variation, that he can feel curiosity and respect for dissimilarities which otherwise would seem to be deviations from the "normal" or expected behavior.

People tend to act according to the way they are brought up. Their reactions are bound to be related to what they were taught as children and young adults. We can be happier if we can accept the fact that this is true for members of other cultures and if we can accept our basic differences.

If culture is learned, it may also be taught. It has always been in the interest of every country to become familiar with the culture of its neighbors. In the technological world of today, where distances have been obliterated, where we have daily information of the happenings in the farthest removed countries, it is our moral obligation to learn about the cultures of those countries if we want to be able to comprehend and judge their actions. Mostly all peoples in the world want comfort and freedom; they have the right to pursue both in

their own way without being misjudged or punished for diverging from an alien culture in their methods of achieving their goals.

Educators should make use of everything written regarding the culture of the subjects they teach, not only their language but their history, social structure and organization, sexual habits, religious rituals and traditions, economic resources and conditions, political organization, social and moral values and beliefs, ideas and institutions, and their arts and literature. Cross-cultural education allows students to learn while taking into consideration their own cultural background, with an understanding of the subject's mode of behavior, those he was taught as a child and which he will never be able to shake off completely. People should not have to stop being themselves to be accepted by others. We should all learn that we are different and should try to understand and respect each other no matter how diverse our cultures are.

Technology has solved the problem of geographic distance between the peoples of the world; cross-cultural education can bridge the more difficult cultural distance if we really want to achieve peace and happiness for all.

Notes:

[1]Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 48. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[2]The writer believes that the attack of the American Embassy in Teheran in 1980 and the sequel of events that followed, besides being a breach of diplomacy, showed the latter's vulnerability when it only provides a skin-deep relationship.

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